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Speculative Fiction
Word Count: 135,000

NATIONCHURCH

by

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BOOK OF REDEMPTION



INTROIT

In the Garden of the Lord Traditional Bookist Reform Hymn

In the garden of the Lord grows a blossom,

In the garden of the Lord grows a bloom

She's the glory of the Gard'ner, she's His prize beyond compare

With her petals heavy with dew

And He bends to His rose, He attends to His rose,

And the Lord steadfastly defends His rose

Her perfume is His, as long as she lives

She is woman, this rose,

In the garden of the Lord

CHAPTER ONE

Even though making lunch is supposed to be her sister's chore, Maggie kicks off her boots, ditches her rain slicker and heads straight to the kitchen. She'll have to cook the macaroni today.

She fills up the big pot with water, only spilling a little bit, and sets it on the blue flames. Pinch of salt. Then she climbs up on the sparkle-white counter, up to the cabinet's top shelf to grab the rattling box of macaroni. She jumps to the floor, the chocolate-colored school uniform parachuting around her legs. She opens the flaps, digs out the cheese packet. Sets out the butter and milk. Everything is lined up, neat.

On tiptoes, she stares into the pot of cold, still water.

For Maggie, waiting is the hard part about macaroni.

Before she realizes, she is muttering the words as fast as she can, so that they spill over each other, just like Mother Conway taught them to do in school:

“ONE! You-shall-have-no-other-gods-before-me. TWO! You-shall-not-bow-down-to-any-carved-image-nor-nor-nor...any-likeness-of-anything-in-heaven-in-the-earth-nor-in-the-four-waters-surrounding-the-garden. THREE! ...”

Maggie got an eighty-one on her Twelve Commandments memorization this morning. She and her best friend Sandy tied for highest grade in the class, but still, Maggie hates that eighty-one. She doesn't *have* to take the retest on Monday, she *wants* to.

“...SIX! You-shall-not-kill-a-man-of-God. SEVEN! You-shall-not-commit-sexual-sins.”

On the test, Maggie got ahead of herself and did the ‘killing’ after the ‘sexual sins,’ instead of before. A stupid mistake. Stupid. She doubles back—

“SIX! Man-of-God. SEVEN! Sexual-sins. SIX! Man-of-God. SEVEN! Sexual-sins.”

Her skinny sister Lindsay stomps in, plops down at the kitchen table and flings a shoebox filled with markers, crayons, colored pencils, a small scissors and craft paper. Her blond bangs hide her face, dusting the page. She rubs and scrubs the crayon until waxy, magenta flakes form.

Lindsay got a forty-three on the test, lowest in their class. If she doesn't pass the retest, she'll have to give sacrifice over it. If she doesn't pass by the end of third grade, it goes on her official California Ecclesiastical Record. And God reads that. (Satan reads it, too.)

“Forty-three percent? It's shameful.” Mother Conway said. “Your father was on the TV last night reciting verse after verse, giving his all so he could get to be one of the Redeemed. But you can't remember your commandments? Honestly, if you don't do better everyone will think you're just a *little who-er*. Is that what you want? Answer me.”

Lindsay's face turned cherry red, her mouth trembled and Maggie thought her sister would lose it. But Lindsay didn't cry. She shook her head and stuck her tongue out when Mother Conway turned her back.

If Mother Conway ever gave *her* the “Little Who-ers” speech, Maggie would definitely cry, but Lindsay just got mad. Maggie adds ‘getting mad’ to her list of ways they’re different. Sometimes people don’t even know the two of them are sisters, much less twins. Maggie’s five inches taller, with darker, curlier hair. And she’s older by seven important minutes.

“Mother Conway was saying it for your own good, to inspire you.” She hops up to sit on the countertop and checks for the first sign of boiling. Nothing.

Lindsay crumples up her paper and starts over.

Maggie says, “You just gotta remember: ONE! God is number one, so it’s ‘No gods before me,’ right? Okay. So, you’re not supposed to imagine two gods: TWO! ‘No carved images.’ Two carved images, but what are their names? THREE! ‘Name in vain—’”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Lindsay rips her paper and sneers. “You’re so, so smart.”

Maggie leans over, stares into the steaming water. A few quiet minutes go by.

Lindsay’s the pretty one—that’s another way they’re fraternal. Maggie’s the big-old, smart one and who wants to be a smart girl? Nobody in the whole Nation Church.

The bubbles get bigger and come faster. Maggie watches until the pot boils and boils and boils. In one dump, in goes the boxful of pasta.

Whoosh! The water calms instantly. Like a miracle.

To a nine year-old Bookist Orthodox girl, there are miracles all around.

Under an unofficial truce, Maggie and Lindsay sprawl at opposite ends of the thick, multicolored carpet in the rumpus room. While Maggie plays on her GameGirl and Lindsay looks at books, they listen to music and watch cartoons. It’s kind of fun, until it gets boring.

Their mom and dad won’t be back from their meeting for a few more hours, four o’clock at least, and Maggie wants to do something else. ANYTHING.

She lobs a ruffled pillow just over her sister's blond head. "Let's walk down to Sandy's."

Lindsay snags the pillow and tucks it under her leg. "We're not supposed to go over by ourself. Besides, in the rain?"

"C'mon. Sandy's sidewalk gets worms when it rains. Sandy and me could be worm queens and you and little Georgie could be, like, soldiers in a worm crusade or something."

"What if we get stopped at the Guardian checkpoint? No way."

Maggie is armed and ready for that question. "They can't do anything. It's totally sanctified. *Totally*. Mother Conway said."

"Forget it. I don't want the Guardians to put me in jail."

"Jail?" Maggie throws her hands up and rolls her eyes. "They'd probably just give a ticket. And besides, nothing's gonna happen."

"Go then."

"Be that way. Fine. I'm going. I'll be home before Mom and Dad get back."

Maggie tosses her GameGirl on the couch and hurries down to the foyer in her stocking feet. She inserts her toes into the roominess of her rubber boots. Her slicker lies the floor where she'd dropped it. When she picks it up, leftover raindrops race down the plastic. She climbs inside, pulls the hood up and yanks open the door.

From the corner, the Eye Friendly emits a happy-sounding, *Peep!*

Maggie waves goodbye to the black, apple-sized dome mounted about waist high. A tiny dot inside glows red and blinks a couple of times.

The Eye and Ear Friendlies were put in to help monitor people's sins. Mother Conway says they should hate them, because they're from the Guardians of Doctrine & Discipline who are Bookist Reform and have it in for the Bookist Orthodox. Maggie always waves at it to keep from getting a ticket for disrespecting. It never works.

She shuts the door behind her. *Peep!*

It isn't raining much. More like a drizzly fog. The clouds swirl like gray soup just above the housetops. In fact she can't see the leaves of the palm trees out by the street, not until she's right up under them. To her right and left, all along Ruth Street, the brand-new, antique-looking streetlamps are lit up even though it's daytime. At first it seems spooky to Maggie, until she decides it might be a good sign. With the fog, the lamps have halos.

Maybe the Guardians won't be at the checkpoint because of the rain, she thinks.

She sets off down the wide, flat sidewalk, past her neighbors' large, familiar, landscaped yards. Her boots stomp in as many puddles as possible.

A short block later, she turns onto Constantina Avenue where the road heads down a long hill. In the gutter beside the curb, a river gushes by, gathering speed, carrying leaves and sticks and trash down toward the corner where there is a wide lake, almost deeper than her rubber boots.

Almost deeper, but not quite. She steps in, enjoying the suction of the cold water, as her toes keep completely dry. Best of all, there is an irresistible giant whirlpool at the storm sewer. She shuffles her feet, daring herself closer to the yawning, echoing drain where the water disappears. The grate is so large she could almost fit in there and get swept out to sea.

A surprising drop of rain splats on her hood. And another one. She ought to go back home, probably. But she can make it to Sandy's before it rains hard. (And when it lets up again, the two of them *most definitely* need to come back here to the whirlpool to play.)

The uphill part of Constantina is a few blocks long. She sloshes on trying to think of the water races they could do instead of thinking about the rain or the checkpoint coming up. The closer she gets to the turn onto Sandy's street, though, the slower she goes.

It's totally sanctified for Maggie to walk by herself in public. The rule is: only women need a male escort and Maggie isn't woman yet. But what if the guardian on duty doesn't know the rules? Or what if he likes to hassle Orthodox girls? He could give her a ticket for sure. Could he arrest her? Probably. What then? Would they take her to Doctrine & Discipline headquarters?

She hasn't seen a car go by in a long time. None of the nearby houses have lights on, or their curtains are shut. The wet, black arms of leafless trees reach over to touch those on the other side of the street and kind of creep her out. It's raining in earnest now. She's nearly there.

For luck, she starts to recite her Twelve Commandments. For extra luck, she does them backwards. "TWELVE! Only-through-blood-shall-mankind-be-redeemed,-therefore-keep-the-Lord's-sacrifices-unto-the-end-of-days. ELEVEN! Let-nothing-neither-defile-nor-mar-the-ivory-skin-of-the-body. TEN!..."

Her boots march in time with the words. By the time she gets to ONE!, she's turning onto Deuteronomy Lane where—

Her charm worked! The barricade separating the Bookist Orthodox neighborhood from the Bookist Reform is pushed off to the side and the guardians are nowhere in sight. Even their blue D & D vans have gone. All that's left is a bunch of black skid marks on the pavement.

Filled with all kinds of relief, Maggie tags the abandoned barricade with her hand, dashes past two houses and up Sandy's familiar, rosebush-lined sidewalk. To Maggie's delight, the concrete is so wormy, she has to tiptoe to keep from stepping on her future army.

She clomps up the wooden steps of the porch and pushes the bell. At the corner of the house, a waterfall spills off Sandy's gutter and into a sharp looking bush.

She pushes the bell again, unsure whether it rang.

Nothing. She opens the screen to knock.

That's when she sees it, the red tape, wide as her hand, around the door crack. She can't read it, of course, but Maggie recognizes: 'Do Not— Do Not— Do Not— Do Not—' printed over and over. The other words are just letters.

This is one of those sinful times she wishes girls were allowed to read.

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Seated on the scratchy waiting room couch, Marilyn poufs and redistributes her hair for the twentieth time before she puts her hands in her lap. In seconds though, her fingers take flight and are off on mission number twenty-one. Why did she cut it last week? Why?

From behind his computer screen, the balding assistant sighs. "Really, Mrs. Donohue. His Excellency will be out in a minute."

Marilyn may die of nerves. They've reached a decision. Why else would Bishop Reilly have called?

Next to her David is checking on his phone for sports scores or something. His long legs stretch out in front of him, crossed at the ankle. Besides a little bit of a tummy and a few faint lines, he could be a carefree teenager. After all his studying, taking test after test, and the TV appearances, here he is: fine and dandy, cool as a cucumber. How can he just sit there?

The only problem is, one of David's sand-colored cowlicks has escaped. She reaches over to corral it and he brushes her away. *Husbands!* she thinks, *They really are like childr—*

Without warning, the gigantic wooden door swooshes open, causing Marilyn to nearly jump out of her skin.

"Dr. Donohue, Mrs. Donohue, good to see you. Come on in." Bishop Reilly says. David follows the bishop's gesture and Marilyn follows her husband. "No calls, Ted."

Up close, he looks much larger than from the women's balcony. With his short bristle-y hair and broad chest, he looks like a trained grizzly, one she doesn't dare look in the eyes.

The bishop swings the door closed behind them, sealing them inside the chambers. She isn't sure what she expected it to look like, but it wasn't this. Narrow, windowless with high ceilings, it even smells pious. And look at all the books on the shelves. *No, don't look.*

“Still coming down outside, is it? Please, sit, sit...” The bishop's lovely robes—cappuccino brown cassock with gold and cream vestments—swing and sway around him until he plants a large thigh on the front of his oiled, black desk. “David, you tell your dad that golf is still on tomorrow. He won't get out of it because of a little rain.”

“He told me to tell you it's divine intervention, Excellency.”

David laughs his breezy laugh and relaxes back into the tufted chair. Marilyn takes a posture-perfect seat on the edge of her chair. She smoothes her toast and sienna-colored skirt across her lap and switches her automatic smile on as the men talk.

She has only seen the bishop once face-to-face—a year ago, just months after the family converted to Bookist Orthodox. After the service, the bishop was shaking the congregants' hands as they left. After much deliberation, Marilyn got up her nerve to tell him how moved she was by his message.

But when her turn came, he took her elbow and whispered in her ear, “Perhaps you weren't aware, daughter, in the Bookist Orthodox reading, clip-on earrings are considered adornment with jewels. We take the Eleventh Commandment seriously.”

She was too ashamed to tell him the truth: she'd worn the clip-ons to hide her piercing holes. When they were Bookist Reform, ear piercing wasn't slutty at all. Now she knows.

She shifts in her seat. Her diligent fingers reassign some golden brown hair from the back of her head forward over her once-sinful lobes.

The bishop laughs. “What's your dad's take on the bribery scandal? The president can't seem to keep his foot out of it, can he?”

“Dad says President Hahn had better rein his boys in. His poll numbers are dropping...”

Like a good wife, Marilyn ignores the political talk, focusing instead on the Bookist Cross on the wall behind, on the fuzzy pictures of grandchildren on the desk. Then she spots a thick, khaki-colored envelope lying on the blotter. The flap is sealed with ivory wax and an embossed insignia. His Sacred Council. David’s fate—her family’s fate—is pressed under the bishop’s thick leg.

Oh, no. David didn’t make it into the Redeemed, is her first reaction. The chitchat continues as dread wells up inside her, but Marilyn makes an effort to laugh in the right places. *Just open it and get it over with.*

Then, she looks up at the cross and considers a new possibility. An almost impossible possibility. What if the letter contains good news? It might. She’s got a good feeling about this—her intuition is almost never wrong. All her attention is on that letter now. *Open it. Open it!*

At that exact moment, as if he could read her mind, Bishop Reilly takes up the envelope. “Well, David, let’s get down to it, shall we? His Sacred Council has made their decision about the Redemption Ceremony. The results will be delivered on the show tomorrow of course but they’re giving people a heads up now. Are you ready? Should we have a trumpet fanfare?”

David does a comic little toot and Marilyn’s laugh comes out at triple volume. The oriental-style letter opener breaks the seal and for a long minute, the bishop mumbles as he reads.

Marilyn’s joyous heart goes tripping over itself. She looks over and does her extra-wide smile, the one where her nose wrinkles. She’s trying to infect her husband with gladness but David won’t play along. He looks like he always looks. Can’t he let himself be excited for once?

The bishop’s heavy face clouds, then darkens. “Hmmm,” he says.

Oh, no. Oh, no. I knew it. I knew he wouldn’t get it. She’s had a bad feeling all morning.

“David, what can I say?” His voice is low and sad, the one she imagines he uses at funerals. “Seven thousand laymen applied for just three Orthodox slots. You’ve only been Ortho for what, six, eight months now?”

David answers, “A year and seven months, Excellency.”

“Right. Well, it’s been more than forty years since His Sacred Council chose a new Brotherhood of Redeemed. The last twelve were exceptional men. That’s why the Lord kept them alive for so long. I’m afraid the Sacred Council was looking for someone more...more...” A sprig of a smile sprouts and blooms across his jowls. “I can’t do it. As Bishop of the City of Angels Diocese of the Bookist Orthodox Church, on behalf of His Sacred Council and the Most Holy Redeemer—Dr. David Donohue, I am pleased to offer you a slot in the Redemption Ceremony. Congratulations, you’re going to be Redeemed. All Praise, All Praise.”

David jumps up. “What? You’re kidding.”

Marilyn bounces up and down in her chair like it was electrified, shriek-gasping in delight. “You did it! I knew it, Honey Bear. I knew it, All Praise! AllPraiseAllPraiseAllPraise!”

She wants to reach up to hug him and she almost does, right out in public. Thankfully, David’s broad hand squeezes her shoulder, fixing her in her place, as his other one pumps the bishop’s fist. “I don’t know what to say, Your Excellency. Thank you sir, All Praise.”

“Try to look surprised tomorrow, huh? Well done, David.” The bishop tucks his robes under and rolls his contoured chair beneath the desk. “You will be—and I quote: *...the lay face of the Sacred Council, proof that God’s law is achievable for the common man, a walking, talking inspiration.* You think you’re up for it, Designee Donohue?”

“Wow.” A chuckle and an ear-to-ear smile. “I’m not so sure now!”

“Like the old saying goes: The Sacred Council is great at interpreting God’s laws, but they’re too damned ugly to sell them. That’s your job.” The bishop chuckles and swivels toward his computer.

David takes the opportunity to give his wife’s hand a warm squeeze. He even winks.

Using two fingers on each hand, His Excellency tippy-taps on the keyboard, entering the code from the letter, and then pivots the screen so they can see a series of graphs and charts.

“So here’s where you stand. Your test results were fantastic. You’re a layman but you’re also dean of St. Crispin University’s theology department, so no worries obviously. Your Spirolean Greek exam was almost perfect. Don’t get me wrong, the Neo Orthodox, the Ultra Orthodox, even the Bookist Reform, they’re redeeming some good men. But the three Orthos? Confidentially, the Most Holy Redeemer said that you guys are the gold standard.”

More tapping. Another page.

“Most important, the focus group loved you. ‘*Sincere.*’ ‘*Seems to care about people like me.*’ ‘*Inspiring.*’ ‘*He’s a home run.*’ I’ll have Ted print these out before you leave. We’ll make your dad a copy, too. Everything looks great. Just great.” Pausing, he leans back and searches David’s face for something.

David helps him. “But...”

“But, it’s only October. For the next six months, you’re a Designee. You’ll be all over the media, I don’t have to tell you. People will notice things. Watch out for the little infractions. Listen, David, I know you. Don’t drive yourself crazy but, you know, dot your I’s. Cross your T’s. It’s the price the Bookist Orthodox pay. The burden of The Brown. You understand.” The bishop’s gaze flickers ever so briefly to the Eye and Ear Friendly.

Even Marilyn understands.

David says only, “Sure.”

After more jokes and slaps on the back, Bishop Reilly stands and shepherds the two of them toward the light of the outer office. “Enjoy yourself, son. Soon your life is not going to be your own. Which reminds me. You’ve given your husband two girls, correct, Mrs. Donohue?”

She freezes. Clears her throat.

David says, “Marilyn?”

“Two. Yes.” Not having spoken aloud in half an hour, Marilyn finds her tongue dry and foreign feeling. “Maggie and Lindsay. We have... he’s got two girls, All Praise.”

“Daughters don’t belong to their father; they belong to their future husband.”

“Yes, Excellency.”

“Daughters!” His stern face turns into a crinkly smile. From a hidden pocket in his robe, the bishop takes out four golden tickets. “Here are some extra Coitus Coupons, so you can work on a son for your husband. Is that a deal?”

Marilyn mumbles, “Thank you, Excellency.” She reaches to take the coupons—

“But first...” he says, holding the tickets back, “I hate to ask, but have you been using paints to highlight your natural, registered shade of—I think my notes said, *medium chicory*?”

From behind his desk, the assistant says, “Hickory, Excellency.”

“Thank you, Ted. *Hickory* brown. Look. It’s 2001. I’m a man of the world. I’m aware that some women dye their hair...”

If hair could blush, Marilyn would be a redhead. “Lemon juice is all. Lemons are sanctified, I thought... Since we’ve been Ortho, Father, I mean *Excellency*, I promise, I...”

“But your husband is a role model for all Orthos now. And you reflect him best with your modesty.” Bishop Reilly chuckles, hands her the coupons. “I know you’re a good girl. My own daughters used to use lemon juice. But if it gives the *appearance* of paints, maybe you could lay off until the Redemption Ceremony, hmmm?”

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Maggie knocks the knocker, since the bell is busted. “Hello?”

Is Sandy playing stickers with little Georgie? Is that why the door is sealed shut? He’s three and so cute, but Maggie’s not in the mood for stickers. This many worms don’t come along very often. What if they put them on leaves and raced them down the river?

Maggie bangs again. “Sandy? Mrs. Lee?”

She heads down the steps and around through the wooden gate that leads to the back yard. Nobody’s there, but someone piled a lot of junk in front of the garage, like for a yard sale or bonfire. The wading pool, bicycles, garden equipment, heavy sacks of cement. The heap is taller than she is.

“Sandy? SANDYYYYYY!” she yells up at her friend’s bedroom window.

The kitchen door has more red tape, only instead of being in the cracks, it is stretched in red lines from one side, across the doorway to the other. ‘Do Not— Do Not— Do Not—‘

Figuring that Sandy’s mom is too busy to stop what she’s doing, Maggie decides to peel back a sticker or two and let herself in. Mrs. Lee won’t care.

“Hey, Sandy. Mrs. Lee? Georgie-Porgie? It’s me.”

The door hangs off its hinge and scrapes the floor when she pushes it open. When she comes in, she is surprised there’s no peep. Their Eye Friendly is making a weird buzzing noise and the dot part inside is stuck on red, not blinking.

The kitchen looks messy. Extra messy. Two of the stove’s burners are on, until Maggie turns them off. Some of the drawers and cabinets are open. They must have made soup for lunch because all the bowls are on the table along with some grilled cheese sandwiches with bites out of them. As she steps toward the table, her boot sends a piece of glass skating, tinkling across the tiles. One of the soup bowls is busted on the floor. Rice. Pieces of glass in the broth puddles.

The wooden knife holder thing is lying on its side, spilling knives across the counter and a couple on the floor. They learned about kitchen knives in school. She catalogues them as she puts them away on the counter, out of the baby's reach—paring knife, bread knife, butcher knife, carving knife.

“Hey, guys. Where are you?” The extra quiet house makes her voice sound extra loud.

When she steps into the living room—Oh. Oh, man—it looks like there was a tornado or an earthquake. All the furniture flipped over and the cushions ripped open with foamy white stuffing exploded all over the place. Wires like crazy hair coming out of the piano. The pictures hang on the walls, but smashed. Jaggedy glass teeth still in the frames.

Maggie's heart is beating hard and she wants it to stop.

One time, Sandy and Maggie saw four coyotes walking across the road, come down from the canyon. Maybe they got in the house. What else could make such a scary mess? “Mrs. Lee? Anybody home? Sandy? Georgie? ...Hello?”

Sandy's dad said coyotes are mean, but they're too scared to attack people. But coyotes could get Georgie, couldn't they? Georgie's so little. What if the coyotes came in and Sandy and her mom ran off for help? Something tells Maggie for sure that Georgie is here and he needs her.

“Georgie? Georgie-boy? Don't worry. It's Mag-mag.” Maggie's voice is shaky sounding.

She hurries back to the kitchen to get a pot lid. Coyotes are scared of noise. She clangs on the lid with a wooden spoon as loud as she can. *TAP! TAP-TAP! TAP-TAP-TAP-TAP!* That makes her feel brave. She makes her way, stumbling and climbing though the living room. Her rain boots make crunchy sounds on broken glass.

When she reaches the stairs, it looks like the coyotes dumped the most stuff there: a mattress, and a nightstand, and the dollhouse that Maggie and Sandy always used to play with, and a jewelry box, the upstairs television. All of them with their insides hanging out.

“Don’t be afraid, Georgie-boy. I’m coming!” *TAP! TAP-TAP!*

Starting up the stairs, she slips on the junk, but she can’t hold the railing or she’ll have to stop clanking. Why didn’t she grab a butcher knife instead of this stupid pot lid?

TAP! TAP! “Georgie? Can you answer Mag-Mag? Can you—”

She’s at the top landing. Something is bad up here. There are big, brownish, wet streaks of something on the wall ahead that she tries not to see but it’s too late. The spoon smacks the lid: *tap. tap-tap tap tap-tap*. It doesn’t make the streaks go away. Part of her had hoped it might.

Maggie doesn’t want to cry because it might make Georgie upset. But she can’t help it. She rubs her accidental tears with her fist. He’s so little.

The upstairs hallway is dark, dark, dark, dark. She flips the light switch back and forth. It won’t go on. The window at the end is open and it’s raining in down there. So windy that the curtain is flapping around like a big bird.

Maggie can’t see anything. She tries to say “Georgie?” but it comes out like crying and she can’t stop it. Something is bad here. The only sound she hears is her little *tap! tap!* on the lid and flapping of the curtain bird.

One boot at a time, she steps toward Georgie’s room down at the end of the hall. He needs her. The coyotes. She’s walking past Sandy’s parents’ room. Outside of the bathroom now. (There’s a bright white light coming under the door crack, but Maggie doesn’t want to open it.) It’s so, so, so, so quiet. The rug is sticky under her boots, but she won’t look down. Her mouth tastes funny.

There’s a lump of something at the end of the hall. Maggie can’t make it out. She can’t move any closer. Can’t move at all. Something smells.

The swooshing curtains flap and brush against it, but the dark lump doesn't move. It's getting rained on probably. She smells it. Something is bad. She shuts her eyes. Maggie works at making them open again but she can't do it.

"I'm sorry, Georgie." She's just making sounds now, but that's what she tries to say, standing in the middle of the hall. "Poor Georgie. Don't be afraid. I'm sorry...so sorry...I can't."

Monday morning, the golden California sun spills down. Usually all the girls would be fidgeting, anxious to get out on the playground and run, but today is different. Dressed in their Orthodox brown uniforms, they sit at their desks, eyes front. In the back of the dust-smelling room, Mother Conway stands like a monument.

A happy-looking guardian with red hair and a red face and a gun in his holster gets up to tell them that Sandy's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lee, were very bad people. Sandy and Georgie, too.

But it isn't because they were Orthodox that they were bad, he says. He wants to make that very clear.

"...The Guardians of Doctrine & Discipline may be Reform, but we do not target the Orthodox. Far from it," he says and gives a laugh like someone told him exactly where. "Right, Mother Conway?"

Using the corner of their eyes only, the students glance over at her. Maybe five times a day, she tells them that the Reform doesn't really believe in the true Book, but today her stony face isn't saying anything. She aims her chin at him and gives the smallest smile anyone ever gave. She turns and her stiff, robes rustle as she sits down on a kid-sized plastic chair.

After he tinkers with their Eye Friendly, the guardian calls out their names starting with *Bennett, Emily*. One by one, all the girls go up to speak into his recorder. Everyone but Maggie. She already talked to him on that day with the coyotes. When he says her name, he winks at her.

A long time later when he's spoken to them all, he says he wants to give them a word of advice, that it's better for everyone to get closure if they don't mention Sandy anymore, or even say her name. They want closure don't they? "Let's vote on it," he says.

All the brown arms in the class raise and it's unanimous. They want closure. The guardian divides up the stuff in Sandy's desk and passes it out to them as a prize for choosing right. Eugenia sits where Sandy used to.

The guardian props his boots on Mother Conway's desk and plays a game on his phone for the rest of the school day, while the girls work on their knitting projects and hate him through their smiles.

But Maggie finished her knitting assignment last week. Since the guardian gave her the present of Sandy's colored pencil set, Maggie tries to draw but everything comes out stupid looking. After seven crumpled up pieces of paper, she puts her head down on her desk and mutters her Twelve Commandments as fast as she can. Even that's boring and she quits halfway through. She remembers them perfectly now.

Mother Conway comes up behind and puts her wrinkly hand on Maggie's elbow for the first time ever. She lifts up her head and Mother Conway is staring into her eyes where the guardian can't see. She knows what Mother Conway wants and gives a tiny little nod that is like a vow that she should never, ever forget her friend Sandy. Maggie gets a little smile and a *good-girl* pat on the arm before Mother rustles away.

In Maggie's secret-est of secret hearts, though, she wants to forget. The torn up piano, the glass teeth in the picture frames, the stains on the walls, the bird flapping in the hallway, all of them seem printed on the underside of her eyelids, so that every time she blinks she sees them.

Maggie isn't sure what closure is, but if it means forgetting, she wants it very badly.###